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Cincinnati fire chief fired; city manager cites 'concerning workplace culture'

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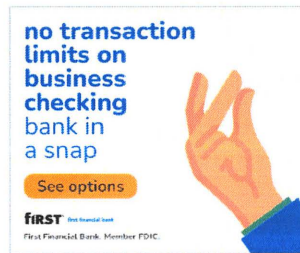
John London X

Reporter

CINCINNATI — Cincinnati's fire chief has been terminated following concerns over workplace culture that is unwelcoming toward women.

Cincinnati fire chief fired over concerning workplace culture

City Manager Sheryl Long announced fire chief Michael Washington has been fired, and a formal termination process is underway.



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Cincinnati fire chief releases statement following termination

Long cited a concerning workplace culture that is unwelcoming toward women. Long said the city wants to create a sustainable workplace culture and believes Washington is not capable of implementing that kind of change.

"I want to be clear that I do not tolerate discriminatory, hostile, or unfair working environments in any City department," Long said in a statement. "Cincinnati's place their trust in the Fire Department, which is tasked with keeping all of us safe. If the workplace culture within the department is unhealthy, that's a violation of the community's trust."

Long told WLWT Friday in an interview she could no longer abide by an unwelcoming tone towards women in his department under his leadership.

She also said Washington did not take seriously the need for an improved culture in the workplace.

"When you minimize that and don't understand that when you have employee problems you have a major problem, that for me was problematic," Long said.

The last straw for her was an assessment by Women Helping Women that a "boys club" mentality existed under Chief Washington.

"What they said was essentially you want your leadership to walk the walk, essentially, and that is not happening in our fire department. And he undermined the effort of the Women Helping Women training," Long said.

Assistant Fire Chief over the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Operations Division Steven Breitfelder has been named Interim Chief, effective immediately, Long stated.

A national search for the next permanent chief will be conducted by a third-party firm hired by the city manager's office.

Long stated interim chief Breitfelder will talk through workplace issues with CFD staff and set expectations that he will address at the Public Safety and Governance Committee of Cincinnati City Council.

"Every employee deserves a safe and fair workplace, and we have to unequivocally reject and rectify violations of that environment," Mayor Aftab Pureval said in a statement. "I fully support City Manager Long's decision, and we will continue to support her during our work to make CFD a healthy and welcoming place for women."

City officials said that during Washington's tenure, multiple CFD employees voiced concerns about the workplace culture, saying it allows women to be unfairly treated and disrespected.

Washington was told to give a climate assessment but never did.

After Long brought in the social services organization Women Helping Women to train CFD staff, both the city and the organization said they were unsatisfied with how Washington implemented the first phase of the training and his lack of concern about workplace issues involving the women on his staff.

City officials stated a memo from Women Helping Women describes uncovering the sentiment that "the problem lies with key leadership, namely Fire Chief" and that "language and actions perpetuate [a] 'boys club' mentality."

Long cites other causes for Washington's termination, including an unexcused unavailability during a fire last year at a high rise in College Hill that left nine people injured, including two firefighters.

In the termination letter, Long stated Washington disobeyed her directive when Lt. Brandon Freeman returned to duty after being arrested for an alleged assault and obstruction of official business.

"Instead of consulting the HR Director as I directed, you contacted me, ignored HR guidance without rational justification, reached an undocumented agreement absent any oversight by me or my designee, exercised poor judgement in reassigning Lt. Freeman, and misrepresented my directives to others," the termination letter states.

[Read the termination letter here.](#)

Washington, Cincinnati's 18th Fire Chief, would have presided over a milestone celebration on April 1, marking 170 years as the nation's oldest professional fire department.

Cincinnati Fire Chief Michael Washington released a statement following his termination.

In a statement, Washington said, "I am thankful for my colleagues at the Cincinnati Fire Department, my friends, and my family for supporting me throughout my 30 years of service to the City of Cincinnati. My time at the department has been one of my life's most rewarding experiences and I will forever be grateful for my chance to serve."

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Washington has retained legal counsel with the Finney Law Firm.

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